

Levon Helm: Dirt Farmer (Dirt Farmer/Vanguard)

by Peter Stone Brown

The first time most people heard Levon Helm sing was way back in 1968 when The Band released *Music From Big Pink*. You had to wait until the end of side one to hear him, and the song was the album's most accessible, "The Weight." The song was at once out front but also vague and mysterious in a Dylan-esque sort of way. Helm's voice was an immediate grabber drawing you into the lyrics in which the singer always seemed to lose. His voice summoned all of American roots-based music all at once, country, blues, folk, gospel, somehow adding up to rock 'n' roll and perfect for storytelling. Helm's storytelling would later be put to excellent use in the film, *The Right Stuff* as well as a couple of music documentaries, one detailing the music to be found on Highway 61.

When the original version of The Band dissolved in 1976, Helm released a succession of solo albums. The first *Levon Helm & the RCO All-Stars* looked great on paper. Surrounding himself with some of the greatest blues and R&B players, at the time, three-fourths of Booker T & the MGs, Dr. John, Paul Butterfield, and several of the top New York session horn players, the album promised more than it delivered. It was tight, it was funky, the songs for the most part were there, but that undefined spark, the magic that should have taken it higher was curiously missing.

In concert, they appeared unrehearsed with key members not showing up. Helm's next eponymous album found him diving even deeper into R&B, and while he's pictured holding drumsticks on the cover, he's not listed as playing drums. Again surrounded by some of the greatest R&B session guys, it was in the good, but not great category. At the time, I wondered why Helm's excellent cover of "Take Me To The River" was ignored on FM rock radio in favor of the Talking Heads' rendition.

Helm turned to Nashville for his next album, which while staying close to R&B also showed more of a country influence. It had one killer track, "Blue House of Broken Hearts." Helm, then returned to The Band's original label for one more eponymous album, which featured more R&B, plus a couple of classics, "Willie and the Hand Jive," and "Money."

Around this time, Helm reformed The Band, at first with his cousins, The Cate Brothers, and then a more defined line-up. It was good to see them, and while the shows had a far more relaxed, friendlier

atmosphere, the intensity was missing. The Band was one of the tightest groups I've ever seen on stage, up there with James Brown's bands and Booker T & The MGs - a group easily capable of duplicating the sound they achieved in the studio onstage. The second version of The Band would often resort to blues they could play in their sleep and occasionally other usually blues flavored covers.

Then tragedy struck with the suicide of singer/pianist Richard Manuel. They continued to perform as The Band, and also as solo performers and duos. In the early '90s their first new album as The Band appeared, followed by two others. They all had moments. When their last album, *Jubilation* was released, it was obvious on that album was well is in a documentary that was shown on TV at the time, there was something severely wrong with Helm's voice. It was announced not long after he had been diagnosed with throat cancer. I'd stopped going to Band shows by then. At the last show I saw the blew cues on songs they'd played hundreds of times and I didn't want the good memories erased by bad ones.

The cracks in The Band myth were starting to show big time. Rick Danko was busted in Japan for heroin possession and spent several months in jail before being released. Insanely overweight, he died in his sleep in 1999. There was no doubt The Band was finished.

Unable to sing, Helm formed a blues band, The Barn Burners. I went to see them once. They were ok, a good blues band with a great drummer. Helm, a totally natural musician, had long ago mastered the art of Chicago blues drumming in a style based more on feel and soul than precision.

Bankrupt and disgusted with the music business, in effort to save his home and recording studio from foreclosure, Helm started a series of concerts at his home in his studio, "The Midnight Rambles." With the help of ex-Dylan sideman, Larry Campbell, Jimmy Vivino, other notable players as well as various guests and opening acts, Helm brought music back to what it should be, a moving, shared, intimate, no bullshit experience. And slowly but surely Helm began singing again.

At the end of October, Helm released a new album, *Dirt Farmer*. Produced by Larry Campbell, and Helm's daughter, Amy, it is an outstanding achievement. To say it is his best solo album is understating the case. It virtually wipes out all his previous solo album as well as those by the reformed Band. It's the first album I've

heard in ages that made me reach for the CD booklet to see who is playing what.

Helm's voice is not what it once was. After throat surgery and 28 radiation treatments, how could it be? It doesn't matter. The heart and soul, the all important ingredients in making music magical are there in abundance.

Interestingly the album is all acoustic and consists of traditional and/or traditional sounding songs by contemporary writers. Some of the songs, Helm learned from his parents growing up. One of the songs, "Little Birds" was done by The Band at their earliest live performances.

Much of the credit has to go to Larry Campbell, who provides, guitar, fiddle, mandolin, resonator guitar, and dulcimer. He sets the perfect tone for each song, and you'd never know he's overdubbing. It is his fiddle work that shines. Revealing his love and knowledge of Celtic music (displayed on his solo album, *Rooftops*), his playing is somehow rough and smooth at the same time, but never slick. Always a team player, he simply knows what to do, always putting the song first.

Also standing out are the startlingly real harmonies of Helm's daughter Amy, and Campbell's wife, Teresa Williams. They zero in on just the right amount of roughness inherent in the music, beautiful without being pretty. While the sound of the recording is clean, the feel is of a front porch on some lonesome mountain, not that of a recording studio.

The music itself is as old as those mountains, familiar, yet new at the same time. The opening tune, a Stanley Brothers tribute, "False Hearted Lover Blues," is the same melody as "Little Maggie," and 'Poor Old Dirt Farmer' is "Rye Whiskey" as well as the Irish song, "Rosin The Beau."

Helm's voice, older, craggier, fits the material perfectly, and his drums, never obtrusive make the songs rock. The other instruments, occasional pump organ or piano, additional percussion add just the right amount of color, appearing when necessary then fading into the blend.

Helm can't resist touching on the blues which he does on J.B. Lenoir's "Feelin' Good," or mixing up genres, giving the Carter Family's, "Single Girl, Married Girl," a loping New Orleans flavored piano-based rhythm. He also moves into gospel territory on the funky brooding

"Calvary," and the closing track, Buddy and Julie Miller's, "Wide River to Cross."

The standout track, on an album of mostly standouts, is a totally moving cover of Steve Earle's, "The Mountain," which Helm makes his own. In the notes, Helm says he first heard the song watching Amy Goodman's TV show, "Democracy Now." Helm's storytelling gifts were never more evident. He is the miner in the song, especially on the heartbreaking third verse:

*I was young on this mountain but now I am old
And I knew every holler, every cool swimmin hole
'til one night I lay down and woke up to find
That my childhood was over and I went down in the mine.*

For those fans of The Band, who've been waiting, perhaps since the second Band album for a return to the feel of what Greil Marcus has termed, "music remembered," *Dirt Farmer* has it in abundance.